

## **Clam Lake Elk News—January 2012 to December 2012; Vol. 12, Iss. 1.**

Calendar year 2012 has been an extraordinarily busy Wisconsin elk year. During this period the department amended its Clam Lake and Black River Elk Management Plans, initiated a cooperative elk trail camera survey, did harem counts, and implemented a second year of assisted dispersal. These additional efforts diverted time away from keeping up with these regular reports. We hope this report adequately bridges that gap of information.

**Current Status:** The 2011-2012 elk year ended with the birth of Cow 135's calf, M360, on May 15<sup>th</sup>. At this juncture, and based upon our past method of estimate, the Clam Lake herd was estimated at 154. Using observed birth rates by age class we estimated that 39 elk calves would be born this calving season. Expanding observed elk losses from May 15 through December 31, leaves 169 elk. Notwithstanding losses of bred cows (February and March are normally the 2 months with the highest wolf losses) we estimate that calf production during the 2013 calving season will be about 38 to 43 calves.

**Winter Elk Trapping.** Beginning on 12 December 2011 we began pre-baiting 2 of our trap sites. We had a strong response at one of the sites and erected the elk trap on 22 December 2011. In January and February we had 6 captures of 78 elk. We recollared 10 cows, 2 calves and 5 bulls and collared 2 uncollared calves. Blood samples were collected from all elk to monitor health and to determine pregnancy status of cows.

We began baiting for the current winter on the 17 December 2012 and on a second Clam Lake site on 31 December. We began baiting at the Butternut site on 2 January 2013.

**Spring Calving Season.** Two weeks of unseasonably warm weather in early March quickly erased the 21 inches of snow that fell on 29 February. Sap rose quickly and deciduous trees began to bud and leaf...then more seasonable weather with night time freezes returned. The 8 May green up date (date when 75 percent of ditches are green grass and 50 percent of aspens are leafed out, particularly aspen stands 10 years and younger) was earlier than the 15 May normal. Daily monitoring of prospect cows began 14 May and continued through June 26. During this period we monitored 38 cow elk daily and searched 28 cows 37 times and found 19 calves. Average calf weight in 2012 of 36.2 pounds is only slightly higher than the long term average of 35.3 pounds. Weight ranges were 20 pounds to 55 pounds. This latter calf was just 1 day old. A general assessment is that cow and calf health was mixed...some were in excellent condition while others were in poor condition. The obvious question is why. The winter of 2011/2012 was a mild winter with a winter severity index (number of days of below zero degrees Fahrenheit and number of days with 18 inches or greater snow) of less than 30 points. This should have resulted in cows and calves in excellent shape. Wolf predation pressures were slightly higher in Elk Year 2011-2012 (13 losses compared to 9 and 11 the previous 2 years), however, Bull:Cow ratios are abnormally high (77 adult bulls:60 adult cows). Furthermore we're observing increased harassment of cows by 2-4 year old bulls at trap sites. Though we have no empirical information to substantiate this, it may be worthwhile to investigate whether excessive bull pressure in fall and winter might be influencing cow and fetus health.

**Elk Research on the Clam Lake Herd:** Scott Roepke's UWSP graduate research on the genetic diversity and evaluation of some population estimation techniques on the Clam Lake elk concluded in February 2012 and found that Wisconsin's elk herd has suffered from a series of population bottlenecks as a result of the reintroduction efforts in Wisconsin and Michigan. He recommended that additional elk be introduced to the Clam Lake herd. Bethany Blicharz began her graduate evaluation of "assisted dispersal", and development of a trail camera survey to estimate elk population growth in January 2012.

**Elk Health Issues:** From January through mid May we lost 6 elk to wolves (two 18 year old cows, 1 bred cow, 1 two year old bull, and 2 calves); 1 adult cow to parasite complications, 1 spike bull to corn acidosis, and 1 calf due to unknown causes.

From mid May through December another 6 elk were killed by wolves (4 calves, 1 yearling bull, and 1 two year old cow); 2 killed by vehicles; 2 calves were poor doers (light, unhealthy calves); 1 yearling bull killed by tribal hunters, and 1 calf killed by coyotes).

In addition to the several thousand CWD samples tested in both the Jackson County and the Sawyer, Bayfield, Ashland and Price County areas in 2002, 2005, 2007 and 2008, all of which tested negative, another 156 samples were taken within the elk management zones in 2012 and another 150 will be collected in 2013 to monitor disease presence.

Residents are reminded feeding elk will lure elk onto highways, causes acidosis, and is illegal. Furthermore, please slow down along STH 77 and County Trunk Highways M and GG in the Clam Lake area.

**Assisted Dispersal Project :** The Moose Lake subgroup has stayed within a couple miles of their release pen for the last 18 months. We hope this strong affinity continues. Trail camera images show bull activity across the Moose Lake subgroup's home range during the September rut in 2012. However, there were few images of Moose Lake cows, therefore, no verification of 2012 calf production by Moose Lake cows. Beth Blicharz monitored the Moose Lake cows during the calving season and a couple searches were made, but no verification of calves born.

On 18 May 2012 7 cows and 5 bulls were released from the Moose River assisted dispersal site (5.5 miles northeast of the Moose Lake site. None of these 7 cows tested positive for pregnancy (unlike 3 pregnant Moose Lake cows in 2011). They stayed in the vicinity of the release pen into August, but then began to disperse. Cows 287, 316 and 320 moved over to the Moose Lake home range. Cows 314 and 315 and Bull 312 joined the Ghost Creek group, and Cow 307 and Bulls 323, 328 and 329 returned to Clam Lake area. Cow 319 was killed by wolves and Bull 341 was killed by tribal hunters. Ms. Blichartz will be evaluating both efforts.

**Elk Plan Revisions.** Both the Clam Lake and Black River elk plans have been amended to include supplemental increases of more elk for both projects (a minimum of 200 for Clam Lake and a minimum of 75 for Black River), and expansion of the Clam Lake elk range by 508 square miles to include extensive county and state public lands with aggressive aspen management. Input into the plan was made by a wide variety of stakeholders, including but not limited to, the US Forest Service, the Great Lakes Indian Fish and Wildlife Commission, the Ojibwa Tribal Voigt Task Force, the Conservation Congress Big Game Committee, the Sawyer, Price and Rusk County Forestry Committees, the Hochunk Nation, the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation (RMEF), the Department's Wildlife Policy Team, the elk advisory committee, 155 citizens attending 5 public meetings, and over 2,400 participants with the department's internet elk survey. All have given overwhelming support to these proposed amendments. On 12 December 2012 the Natural Resources Board unanimously approved these proposed amendments to the Clam Lake and Black River Elk Management Plans. Legislation authorizing the importation of addition wild elk is pending. Already the RMEF, the Hochunk Nation and the Jackson County Sportsman's Alliance have pledged \$300,000, \$100,000 and \$50,000, respectively.

**Population Monitoring and Elk Education:** During the past year we made approximately 3,500 telemetry location determinations and almost 7,500 telemetry mortality checks. During this past year we gave 15 elk

presentations to a total of 706 participants. We also gave 8 print, 1 television and 4 radio interviews. From early August through mid October we deployed 61 trail cameras across 115 square kilometers of elk range and collected several thousand images of deer, elk, bear, wolves, etc. Elk images are being evaluated by the WDNR to determine important population characteristics, and used by Ms. Blicharz and Dr. Tim Ginnett of UWSP to develop a population estimation technique.

**Partnerships:** In December 2011 through February 2012 we met with the Sawyer, Rusk and Price Counties' Forestry Committees and received their unanimous support for the Clam Lake elk range expansion, and have committed to work with them to determine elk release sites. In April elk project staff presented 3 grant applications to the RMEF Wisconsin Project Advisory Committee and received approval for about \$33,000 worth of elk management projects. Elk project staff participated in a tribal "blessings" ceremony prior to the release of the Moose River subgroup in May. In November elk project staff met with Dr. Ginnett and Ms. Blicharz to discuss improvements and expansion to the trail camera survey. Elk project staff received a \$3,500 discount on 50 Cuddeback Attack IR trail cameras and bear boxes from Cuddeback.

**Staffing Changes:** We experienced some major changes this past year. Wildlife and Elk LTE Technician Bethany Blicharz left in January to begin her graduate research on the Clam Lake elk. Scott Roepke, who had just finished his graduate work on Wisconsin/Michigan elk population genetics, was hired to replace Beth. He stayed until mid June when he left for an LTE position in Madison working for Big Game Staff Specialist Kevin Wallenfang. Josh Spiegel was hired in late August to replace Scott. At the time of Josh's interview, he was working from the University of California-Berkeley on a Fisher telemetry and camera survey. Prior Josh was a LTE Wildlife Technician for the WDNR in Merrill. While pursuing his bachelor of science degree at Northland College he volunteered for the elk project, assisting with calf searching.

Matt McKay, who has been with the elk project since May of 2002, took a job as a biology teacher for the Hayward Charter School in July. Christine Priest, formally crew leader for the Deer Research Project in Winter and with elk work experience in the Pacific Northwest and in Colorado, was hired to replace Matt in September. We're back up to full strength, and both are enthusiastic and hard working.

**Elk Hunting:** Rules were approved in 2003 that established a limited bull hunting season. Once we reached 200 elk, 5 percent, or 10 bulls would be allowed harvested. Because the Clam Lake elk herd resides within the "ceded territory", by treaty and Federal Court decision 50 percent of the quota would be eligible for harvest by the Ojibwa bands involved with this Federal decision. Therefore, with a quota of 10, 5 would go to the Ojibwa and 5 to conventional state hunters. During the first 5 years of an elk season, one of the State tags would be made available to the RMEF to raffle, with proceeds to return to the State for elk management funding. If we don't make the 200 threshold in 2013, we should in 2014.

**Upcoming Events:** During the next quarter we will continue our 2013 trapping effort, will coordinate establishment of a stakeholder group to initiate release site selection for the new expanded range of the Clam Lake elk range south of Highway 70, continue monitoring the 80 plus radioed elk, deploy 105 trail cameras across the trail camera study area, and participate in the planning of Wisconsin's hosting of the 18<sup>th</sup> annual Eastern Elk Management Conference to be held April 28 through May 1 at Boyd's Mason Lake Resort near Fifield, WI.

Laine Stowell, 23 January 2013